

Covert Autoethnography

David Coker, Ed. D.

Adjunct Professor

Advanced Education Programs

Fort Hays State University

dccoker@fhsu.edu

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Abstract

Doctoral students and researchers commonly practice reflexivity in the research processes. Covert autoethnography was autoethnography which was denied by claims of reflexivity and statements of being unbiased, neutral, and objective. In the research, 15 educational leadership dissertations using qualitative research from 15 universities in the United States of America were examined using thematic analysis. There were three key findings: theory of purification, act of symbolic verification, and theory legitimization. A discussion ensues, with the recommendation researchers need to develop biases within all facets of research.

Keywords: bias, qualitative research, reflexivity, autoethnography

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People cannot deliberately control their perceptual impressions: a sharply seen hilltop looks near even if one has learned of the effect of clarity on the perception of distance.

--Tversky & Kahneman, 1974

No, no! said the Queen. Sentence first—verdict afterwards.

--Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*, 1865

In studying frameworks used in qualitative research in educational administration dissertations, an interesting phenomenon was exposed: covert autoethnography. *Covert autoethnography* is the disguise of autoethnography to avoid the shame and accusations of fakery wrought by autoethnography. The researcher impacts the results in all studies, but most qualitative researchers seek to display a validity and reliability borne from impartiality (Chenail, 2011). Prior experiences show condemnation of the method of autoethnography, a mark which is connected to hoaxes and antiresearch (Atkinson, 2006; Dauphinee, 2010). For example, the submission by me of a mixed methods study which included autoethnography was rejected by a journal because the study “lacked a method.” The manifestations of covert autoethnography became apparent in concept dilution: Reflexivity and bracketing were/are meaningless acts of fronting. Fronting was the act one does not have a researcher—the self—in the act and reporting of research. Everyone—and I mean everyone—claimed reflexivity and bracketing were

guaranteed methods to prevent biases. The denial of self-as-instrumentality reigned supreme in every research project.

Key points emerged within covert autoethnography: orientation and directionality, glamor shots, need for debiasing methods, disconfirmation/dysfluency, and negative cases (Coker, 2022a). By recognizing and admitting one's covert autoethnography, one can improve research outcomes. First, all research, from qualitative to quantitative to mixed methods, has the autoethnographer's voice in any research report. Secondly, there were methods to identify and separate one's position from one's results. Finally, more work will be needed on debiasing techniques, influenced by forensic sciences.

Background

The literature review was difficult: No one claims their results were invalid, biased, or incomplete to require a complete restudy. Quantitative and qualitative research struggle with the problem of making everything ordered, linear, and positivist:

While large studies are not immune to showing statistical significance but real-world irrelevance, blind adherence to previous research also crippled findings. Social psychology has experienced a replication crisis over the past decade; for example, though 600 studies "confirmed" ego depletion, a re-examination suggested the concept might not exist, was ill defined, and could not be replicated (Coker, 2022a, pp. 403).

Replication in education (Maskel and Pluckner, 2014; the authors point out authors following one's own work did replicate!), psychology (S. Maxwell et al., 2015), and other fields (e.g., Freese & Peterson, 2022; Leppink & Pérez-Fuster, 2017) revealed major problems: Researchers found novel, positive results *every time*, but no/few could ever reproduce them.

Doctoral students were especially at risk, as the dissertation was often the first time one researched and entered the field. The chances of publication, quality, and future use were low (Coyne et al., 2011; Evans et al., 2018). Dissertations in educational administration almost always work, claimed generalizability/transferability, and found novel/important findings (Coker, 2022b). If one conducted research, the chances of finding what one desired was almost a given.

Nickerson (1998) pointed out confirmation bias can be deliberate or implicit, and building a case and making desired inferences were natural and ubiquitous. There were claims reflexivity could mitigate and remove biases (Jootun et al., 2009; Tufford & Newman, 2012; Watt, 2007), but others pointed out not only could reflexivity not be a magical solution to remove biases, how one could access biases and overcome them remained unproven (Coker, 2023; Doyle, 2012; Salzman, 2002). The gap in the literature was reflexivity and being unbiased were popular but lacked a research basis to operationalize the practices and value.

Theoretical Background

A conceptual basis influenced the research design and iteration. Itiel Dror provided a theoretical and inspirational background for the following study. Dror found experts were especially suspect to confirmation bias, using contextualization and others' decisions which unwittingly influenced one's findings (Dror et al., 2006; Kassin et al., 2013). Another issue was theoretical arrogance, where researchers were theoretically driven or using a theoretical spectacle versus theory based (Coker, 2022a; Goia, 2021; Kim, 2015). Instead of using theory and prior research to develop a dialectic, researchers used their theories and one's *weltanschauung* as representations to find and not challenge data.

Methodology

A thematic analysis analyzed 15 educational administration dissertations with a focus on the reflexivity and results sections. Thematic analysis was conducted (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006), with a coding schema of reading/annotating, in vivo, descriptive, memoing, aha moments, questioning, categorization/relationship development, themes, and metathemes (Coker, 2021). All data received a geocode to track location, and intermittent thematic formation was used to track the development of themes while formally questioning, debating, and challenging findings (Coker, 2022b). The reflexivity and results sections were coded and compared to the literature. My position as someone who completed a traditional dissertation, multiple autoethnographies, and frequent peer reviewer, impacted the results.

There were 15 dissertations from 15 different universities in the United States, all in educational administration. The original goal was 15-20 dissertations, as previous research and practices suggested key themes which would be representative would need at least 6-8 in the sample (Guest et al., 2006). All dissertations were from 2010-2020, and the criteria were the following: all dissertations were strictly qualitative in nature, traditional, in English, completely online, and full text available. To achieve variation, there were 7 phenomenological, 6 grounded theory, 1 narrative inquiry, and 1 autoethnography in the study. Of the 15 dissertations, 13 were Ed.D. and 2 were Ph.D. All data from the dissertations were downloaded in Microsoft Word, and data analysis took place in Microsoft Excel.

Results

Covert autoethnography was defined as autoethnography—self as instrumentality and results in either/or/combinatory of analytical and evocative—but hidden and denied. Within the paradigm of covert autoethnography, researchers presented themselves as neutral, objective, and grounded in the research. Three primary results explained the fronting of covert autoethnography; fronting was the denial of self as an instrument and influence in the research.

The three primary methods of covert autoethnography were the following:

- Theory of purification: *the invisibility cloak*
- Act of symbolic verification: *the conceptual dilution*
- Theory legitimization: *theory as antiacademic argument*

The theory of purification explicated the researcher disappeared and did not influence the results. One donned an invisibility cloak, banishing oneself from the study and using the data to speak for itself. Coker (2022a) differentiated orientation from directionality, where one is concerned with a particular problem or viewpoint (orientation) and the other (directionality) sought to confirm/prove one's worldview. Researchers bracketed, developed an epoche, "intentionally prevented biases," "compartmentalize," and "journalized" to remove the researcher. The most common conclusion by researchers: "ensured." Ensured an unbiased study, completely valid, reliable, and neutral. The invisibility cloak meant the researcher, in all instances of the magical reflexivity which lacked any discussion of the microprocesses beyond a label, always removed any biases or problems with interpretations. Some studies acknowledged reflexivity was not a part of one's study (e.g., interpretative phenomenology, autoethnography, etc.), but if one discussed reflexivity, biases and prejudices were eliminated. Many authors mentioned the need for reflexivity as a given in the methods section and never addressed the issue again.

There was symbolic verification, or researchers citing a process in name only and then claiming unfettered success. Lacking were problems, rewrites, or an admission the researcher saw and felt themselves within the research. Unlike Dror's studies, one claimed "journaling," "peer debriefing," "auditing," "understanding," and "transparency" were symbolic acts to tell readers "Look, I followed the guidelines and ideas in my graduate classes. There is no

autoethnography here. Only true, validated, grounded research. Move along.” Lacking was the discussion of the microprocesses of reflexivity, and a doubtful provenance endures because there were no dysfluencies, disconfirmations, theoretical rejections, or divergences. Every concept was diluted to reflect preordained results. There was not a description of how any method worked except a leap of faith that merely writing one’s thoughts or talking with a colleague eliminated biases and prejudices. Overfitting, where super-linearity and lack of any divergence, outliers, or stubs, existed.

The theory of legitimization was the theory was the results. Soft/strong or narrow/broad theory did not matter—no one ever disproved or disagreed with an included theory. Results aligned from the beginning, and theory served an antiacademic argument by using *argumentum ad verecundiam* to develop circular reasoning. Positionality statements were full of meaningless stereotypes which revealed nothing about the hidden *hypothesis*, or what researchers thought one would find. (Are there any researchers who commit to a dissertation over 3-10 years and have no feelings about what they think will happen in their research? Apparently, everyone has no thoughts about the conclusions of their dissertations.) Every researcher in a dissertation expects a finding, yet failing to proffer what one thinks will happen sends one’s autoethnography underground.

Key points emerged within covert autoethnography: orientation and directionality, glamor shots, need for debiasing methods, disconfirmation/dysfluency, and negative cases (Coker, 2022a). Researchers viewed autoethnography as a fake method, not worthy of the label of research proper. By hiding one’s directionality and highlighting glamor shots (exemplars which proved a point while omitting negatives), researchers could confirm their findings were data driven. Debiasing was a methodless decision with guaranteed results; all studies lacked disconfirmation/dysfluency and negative cases. The irony was autoethnography admitted the researcher was part of the study and findings, but covert autoethnographers privileged a positivist post-positivism. The irony of the self-contradiction should not be lost.

There were divergences. Some authors either omitted reflexivity or downplayed the importance. There was an exemplar, where a researcher admitted negatives and outliers, though the section remained incomplete and underdeveloped. There were claims of “ensured,” “deliberately avoided,” and “intentionally resisted,” but one could neither see nor verify the veracity; maybe retreating within oneself was sufficient. Possibly the statements “biases are irrelevant” and “not engaging in my own experiential analysis” were the most reflexive of all.

Absences detailed a major issue: problematization. No researcher in their reflexivity mentioned a dialectic which produced debate, disagreement, and separation amongst the researcher, the participants, and the academic community. If someone did something, there was instant, unmitigated success. How or what moved beyond “putting aside personal bias and suspending judgment,” “feelings . . . did not transfer them into the research,” and “makes it possible to maintain openness” was never explicated except like most methods in qualitative research, everything worked. Qualitativists might claim to be chaotic and post-positivists, but the certainty and neatness of claims would look like parametric tests with p-values statistically significant at the .0001 level if on the quantitative side.

Discussion

There was a hidden reality in every study. First, bias elimination was a myth (McGannon & Smith, 2018). One can recognize, acknowledge, and minimize biases, but biases were endemic to all research which involved humans. No one stated how one eliminated biases beyond if one did something, there was no work or effort and 100% success. Secondly, most every researcher found what one was looking for/desired (confirmation bias); finding the opposite or contradictory results was a stark anomaly (Hamati-Ataya, 2013; Cook & Therrien, 2017). The two points,

being neutral and finding oneself in one's research, were at odds. The conclusion: One's autoethnography went underground, covering up oneself within one's research. Kim (2015) spoke about epics, which produce authoritative, complete stories with no room for questioning or alternatives. Doctoral students, probably subconsciously and implicitly, operate like the publication bias (Banks et al., 2012) common in all research: Finding complete, novel, and unquestionable research. There was a stasis with a gaze and fixation on oneself; within the provincialism was a predestination wrought with a procreation of self within the data. Instead of a transformation, one translated one's self into one's data and results. Ricoeur (1981) and Gadamer (2013) called for questioning, doubting, and identifying one's prejudices within the history, self, and future. Recognizing a *mystory* within the historicity and facticity of one's research can create the critical realism suggested by J. Maxwell (2012).

Many recommendations could improve research. First, the autoethnographer in all of us needs to be recognized, valued, and identified. Secondly, instead of eliminating biases or viewing prejudices negatively (think Spence, 2001), researchers need to harness their biases, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1.
Developing biases to establish reliability and validity.

Problem	Bias	Shift
Critical means urgency; ascribing instead of finding	<i>Kritikos</i> bias	Judge, discern, and question all data, decisions, and results
Linearity in research and thinking	Dissonance bias	Develop a chaotic approach to doubt one's research and challenge priming
Lacking negatives, outliers, or stubs	Disconfirmation bias	Challenge one's findings with reasonable and unreasonable alternatives
Singular categorization, classification, and conceptualization	Continuum bias	Move from overfitting to allowing more categories and degrees of separation
Theory driven and theory arrogance	Mosaic bias	Theories and paradigms should be pragmatically applied and individualized beyond a single path; there are multiple paradigms and theories which control a researcher
Collapsing and reducing research to one voice	Multivocality bias	Develop and honor a horizontalism throughout the research

Contextualizing everything
within one's own view

Decontextualization bias

Examine base rate and
contextualize-decontextualize to
differentiate thinking based upon a
priori/post priori thinking

Kim (2015) pointed out epics were more like propaganda than research. Coker (2023) went so far to make the following startling claim: "If researchers ignored directionality and relational sampling (by failing to recognize one's emotional and personal vulnerabilities), one might as well skip Chapters 2-4 and proceed to Chapter 5." Researchers who subvert themselves in covert autoethnography with the problems in Table 1 work to deny themselves and focus on preferred findings within a frame projected within one's own sense of reality. Tversky and Kahneman (1974) called this phenomenon biases of imagination, often rooted in biases of availability, retrievability, and the search set. The problem of surface excess meant researchers developed a *Snow White* paradox: One's results, married to one's theory and extant thinking, was found easily and was deemed the most fair of them all (Bourdieu, 1988, spoke of *homo academicus*). A multisystemic bias of compression and reduction of the world into a neat, clear phenomenon reduced humans and events to a flat portrayal; a distancing from master narratives and prescriptive macro/meta themes and theories can circumvent a parody of self which becomes agenda driven and more theological-of-self than theoretical or conceptual.

Conclusion There is a challenge to examine this study's validity and reliability: Find a study using critical in the name of a theory which did not find the preferred narrative (one could search for Marxism, decolonialism, or Western-inspired theory, etc., as well, and what one leads with, one finds). Find a dissertation which did not coincide with one's positionality. Find a study where reflexivity created challenges. Myths and oversimplification to the point of ideologues dominated much of the non-autoethnography research. Reflexivity without method relied on the following dubious position:

Reflexivity as self-positioning and self-reporting, in depending on realistic self-awareness and honest disclosure, is a rather pre-Freudian idea, assuming, as it does, that all of our critical personal parameters are available to the consciousness, and that people present themselves with no ulterior motives. These assumptions appear to be unwarranted (Salzman, 2002, pp. 810)

Reflexivity, like many microprocesses in qualitative research, was ill-defined and served a political spectacle devoid of meaning (Coker, 2023). Coker (2020), Quiglet-McBride et al. (2022), Chenail (2011), and Carr et al. (2017) provided a path forward: Defined steps which cause one to unmoor and lose oneself from one's prior position, but in the end admits positionality and biases as part of the process. An adversarial approach amongst and between self, theory, the extant literature, the university culture, and participants can shift covert autoethnography to the overt. Many of the steps were not natural, commonsense, and relied on cognitive science. Covert autoethnography hurts all research by corrupting results under the guise of being nonbiased. The business-as-usual approach privileges the rejection of autoethnography while simultaneously masking validity and reliability.

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